

# Fire of Youth -- by Henry James Forman

(Cont'd from Last Sunday)

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### The Nine.

It was ten o'clock of the following evening when Clarkson's black Fiat hummed its way out of Berné along the main highway in the general direction of Freiburg, Lausanne and Geneva. At the last minute Anthony declined the use of the khaki-colored army car as Clarkson's offer of a more comfortable, and more reliable, machine that might have been a prosperous doctor.

The color of the evening sky was like wine, and the heart of possible adventure to the young men condemned to a prolonged world distended by the war. Clarkson, in a gray coat, was at the wheel, and Anthony was, for the first time, revealing to Ray the purpose of their errand. See-

Clarkson objected Ray, "about an hour to Freiburg." "That's all right, Ray," elucidated Clarkson. "We'll pass the spot by ten or fifteen miles and then back. We don't want to turn round on the edge of a two-hundred-foot drop. I know that road."

Clarkson, with Ray, Anthony swung himself, as on wings, over the back of the front seat and sat on the side, and greeted him with a suppressed and bubbling laugh, as of a very excess of mirth.

"How is she?" Clarkson gave him an invariable stare. With ill-suppressed laughter he broad-visaged he then asked:

"Watson—you disturb me. Do you not perceive I am Watson?"

"Watson, as I live!" exclaimed Anthony with mock incredulity, and they shouted with laughter schoolboys.

For the first time in some years they felt a boy again. Their bones were glowing with the light of action, of excitement, and a touch of horse-play. In such a mood they experienced a sudden change that was the inkling of all America—of all the boys in France and

into France. They would be going and seeing into battle and seeing they would see. He contrasted them with the European faces among

he was living, and all of his Americans in teeming cities New York or in towns like Littleton, in village or hamlet or on a sudden seemed in-

stantly dear to him, a new race, a new humanity, whose hearts were the hearts of children, the hearts of America, he thought, whatever joy in the world.

"God for such darn fools!" said Anthony, touching his arm.

"The same to you, Old Skeel," Clarkson.

"This is this, Clarkson." Anthony became serious. "After you

Freiburg and we'll pick the spot where we leave the car. But don't

be right on toward Ray. Just before entering the

we have what looks like a shortage of petrol

Then we turn round and go back to Freiburg—only we

get there. We softly and stop our car in the chosen

which will be as dark as possible. We creep up on them

the signal we creep back, for our car, start her with as

as possible and shoot

Watson, marvellous! really—for an amateur!"

Clarkson drove on joyously.

Clarkson, spur of hillside beyond about which the high

curves beautifully westward, is

with a magnificent grove of

park or plantation. The

have endured centuries of

years in which to practice

the slope to that it is

of trees is steep, but it is

with a lush growth of

through which a man might

the darkness and be hid-

no bushes or undergrowth

that pretty decisively.

the way to shade tree they

picked their spot as they came to the head of the curve, and slowly they continued their course round the gracefully bending road. An occasional light blinking a couple of hundred feet beneath their wheels in the valley below was the only sign of human presence near them. The grove in itself is of small dimensions and they agreed that they would follow the sound of the voices of those who were to meet there and creep as near to the voices as they dared. Anthony was to be in the lead, and as soon as he fixed upon the listening post Ray, who understood the dialect, would creep up and lie beside him. A little below these two Clarkson was to lie and cover them with a loaded revolver. They were determined, however, to make no manner of use of weapons unless it were desperately necessary. Their purpose was to glean information—and nothing else.

Quietly the car moved on toward Bayern, and, in due course, Clarkson, though he saw not a soul in the road, stopped his car, swore softly, alighted and examined his gasoline gauge.

"Why, dash it," he said to the others with a delighted histrionic wink, "we're short of petrol. Got to go back to Freiburg."

"Why, dog-dash it!" cried Ray. "You don't mean it!"

"What a lemon of a chauffeur we drew!" exclaimed Anthony. The spirit of fun was irresistible to them, and they stood there, chuckling and laughing under the blinking stars, feeling marvelously free and happy.

"I remember when I was a kid, about nineteen," began Clarkson, "I was doing a Summer's cattle punching on my old man's ranch—a crazy kid like you youngsters—and I got it into my head that the lazy, sodden no-account Indians on the nearby reservation were going to attack us."

"Sorry to interrupt a yarn," broke in Anthony, showing the luminous disk of his watch, "but it's quarter to twelve. We've got to be hiking."

"This had hadn't any poetry to him," complained Clarkson. "Look at the soft night, the stillness, the mystery, the young moon—the sleeping, unsuspecting edelweiss—

the chamomile—and didn't Biff! Tell 'em live around here, and Mr. Excelsior?"

"You're mistaken, Clarkson," laughed Anthony. "I've been thinking of that young moon all the time."

"Ain't it a beauty?" exclaimed Clarkson.

"Yes—but I wish it would go away and put on a pair of clouds—or hide—or something. We'd be better off without any moon just now."

Cautiously Clarkson turned his car about and they sped away toward their chosen shade tree.

A vivid emotion of happiness, like a warm tide, was flooding Anthony's bosom. He was serving and he was happy, absorbed. Self and petty cares of self—those were the quicksands of unhappiness. It was quarter past twelve when they reached the spot selected, and as Clarkson turned off the ignition the engine expired with a faithful sigh.

"Caution! the word now!" whispered Anthony. "Everything depends on that—and a little bit of luck. The one thing we mustn't have is an accident."

With the immemorial thrill of the hunter they stooped down in the shade of the tree, and flat on their stomachs, like Indians or scouts, began their slow creeping ascent through the tall grasses of the slope. Intermittent seemed the time as they strained and labored and guarded against even the ghost of a sound, until they reached the rimmed inky shadow of the pines, and it was only then that luck and the young moon favored them by

giving softly into a darkling cloud-bank. Anthony paused and listened intently. The others crawling behind also paused. Lights would have revealed them, with their arms extended, as a dark twenty-foot line in the lush grass. The augmented brilliance of the stars, their twinkling serenity seemed to be shedding upon them a mantle of peace, an invisible sheet of endless security.

The hum and murmur of voices

Their intently straining ears finally localized the sound of the voices as coming from the right. Cautiously Anthony advanced again, and the line of his companions came softly winding like a serpent behind him.

The voices were becoming more and more audible. Anthony could not distinguish articulate speech.

Some ten yards before him he beheld a massive group of men sitting and squatting on the dry needles, engaged in deep colloquy. He moved a few feet nearer and paused. A moment later Ray crept up to his side. With thickly throbbing hearts and open mouths, to lessen the sound of breathing, they listened.

forward, intently absorbed, they were discussing Celigny as a place of meeting.

Anthony counted them. There were eight—nine—ten! But the tenth of them was Von Rathenau, the master of the ceremony. Like another Mephistopheles, he talked with incisive distinctness, and his gleaming eyes seemed to dart from one to another of the grim-boarded faces, as in some council of infernal regions.

"God!" said Anthony to himself. "For once she hasn't lied!" And the picture of Vilma, protesting, pleading, with outstretched arms, floated before him like an apparition.

Celigny was the rendezvous and point of departure—and suddenly he heard from Von Rathenau's lips the word "Amerikaner." His heart leaped wildly. Was their presence detected, suspected?

Mercifully the beam of moonlight faded and darkened, and Ray on a sudden gave a tug to his coat—the signal for going back.

"Did you get it?" Anthony breathed into Ray's ear.

"Got it all," was the answering breath.

Intelligence officer in France! Oh, say, won't I have the laugh on old Nunks!" And he found the force to hug himself delightedly.

"Never mind the laugh on old Nunks!" threw Clarkson over his shoulder. "What we've got to do is to get them!" And with grim lips he sped the car toward Freiburg and Berné through the rushing night, anxious to return before the betraying dawn.

It was a day of glamour and excitement. In his present life, so remote from that kind of thinking and that species of activity, the day remains graven in Anthony's memory as a concrete picture—a composite photograph of an old, intriguing, medieval, Borgla-like world which, in the simplicity of our idealism, we enlisted to extinguish. Whether human nature and all too human ways can be thus obliterated is another matter. Pessimists say it is impossible, and offer the no less impossible prescription that the Creator is said to have used in the case of the Continent of Atlantis—sink the whole boiling, simmering mass under the merciful, merciless ocean.

It was Thursday, the Fourth of July. Colonel Cole had learned enough of his surroundings to trust nobody, not even the walls of his office. With seeming carelessness he asked Anthony and Ray to accompany him on a little drive to Belp, "to take the air," he said casually. It was delicious to see that simple-hearted cavalry officer practice the dark ways of intrigue! There in that heavy khaki-tinted limousine, with only the broad back of his lanky chauffeur—a private detailed from a Kansas regiment in France and formerly a cowboy—for the one possible eavesdropper, Anthony, supplemented by Ray, told his story. The colonel listened calmly at first, like the blasé old diplomat he imagined himself to be. He was endeavoring, with his brown face and graying moustache, to look like one of those monstrous statesmen he had read of in fiction, whom nothing surprises, nothing astonishes. He could not, however, help rubbing his hands gleefully when he got the full purport of his "boys'" exploit.

"Let's run over and see Michaud," he muttered gruffly. But the boys were seeing through him. He was crackling with excitement. "Got to see Michaud," he repeated; "it's his territory."

"Do you think he'll hog the show, sir?" queried Ray with a note of plainness in his voice. "These French!"

"No, no," interrupted the colonel. "No fear. Give him hell if he tries it. Besides—he won't try it." Michaud was an Ally, and the colonel said no more. But in his heart he proudly felt that Michaud would be glad enough to let his young American officers bear the brunt of the enterprise and profit by it. The colonel felt a joyous access of pride in his boys.

"Ought to be promoted—every one of 'em," he thought, but on that point he was not sanguine. "Pocketed us like this in the middle of Europe"—he reflected the sentiment of nearly every soldier and public servant—"forgot us—that's what they did." "They" was a preoccupied, oblivious, careless G. H. Q. that kept promoting between meals the members of its own, proximate, immediate staff, but forgetting everybody else.

That day was like a spell of semi-intoxication, when one's brain is half alert and half amused at the odd, funny things one sees oneself doing, when dull care lies buried and one is laughing at the obscures.

Michaud, the French military attaché, was smoking his after-breakfast cigar, though it was nearly half-past ten. He was in white duck trousers, with a dark, heavy, woolen lounge coat—for to remove one's coat is to lose all dignity—to be, in effect, an American—at least, not a diplomat.

"Have you heard what we did yesterday at Moulins-sur-Touvent?" he cried, puffing great clouds of smoke. "A thousand prisoners, mes amis—at least a thousand. Not bad, that." And with his black moustache he looked precisely like Otis Skinner in "The Honor of the Family."

"Michaud, come for a ride—I'll take you to your office," invited the colonel suavely. "Such a beautiful day!"

Michaud glanced inquiringly from one to another of the trio.

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"With a catlike agility he wrenched himself loose, whipped out an automatic and with a snarl of rage sent a bullet crashing into Anthony's body."

reaching them now, however, sharply brought home to them both their errand and their danger. Instantly their nerves responded like the fast strings on fiddle or harp. The vocal sounds seemed to float at first from the very bosom of the night.

Hark! What was that? A tiny twig had cracked. To their ears the stillness was shattered as by a gunshot. With wildly leaping hearts they lay still. Had they been heard? Cicadas, locusts and other insects made a distracting orchestra that was like the blended voice of the silence. The passing of the moon brought a gentle breeze with tinkling musical rustle in the pine needles. Ages of time seemed to pass. No, they had not been heard.

The speech of the men was in German and in the guttural dialect of Switzerland.

Celigny was a word that kept recurring in their arguments, but Anthony could not at first be clear of their meaning.

Suddenly the clouds parted and the mischievous young moon cast a faint beam of light upon the clump of men. Anthony stifled a gasp when he realized that he and Ray were barely lying in the shadow. Six inches nearer and they would have been detected. Still as death they lay there, peering at the cluster of men, bearded, most of them, sharply resembling Frenchmen—as though they had been picked for that ethnic similitude. Leaning